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**What Kind of Parliament?
A Comparative Perspective on the European Parliament**

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When we consider the formal structure of the European Parliament (EP), we find an organization similar to what we observe in most other parliaments: the Parliament is headed by a President supported by a Conference of Presidents and a Secretariat. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are organized in party groups, and the plenary can delegate work to standing and special committees. Yet in many respects, the EP constitutes a distinct kind of parliament. In order to understand how the Parliament works, it is important to take into account these particularities. Moreover, in the course of the integration process, the structures and modes of operation have changed significantly (Judge and Earnshaw 2008). The Lisbon Treaty marks a further stage in this evolution.

Before it was directly elected in 1979, the EP existed as an assembly of delegates of national parliaments. In those days, legislative powers in the EU remained with the Council of Ministers. While the Parliament had limited rights to participate in legislation, it emerged as a deliberative institution influencing politics by expressing opinions on salient issues. In this way, it increasingly attracted attention and acquired strength in the inter-institutional politics of the European Community.

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Due to the rising demands for democratization, member state governments had to concede legislative powers to the EP (Rittberger 2007). The Lisbon Treaty declared “co-decision,” which gives the Parliament a veto right as part of the ordinary procedure in EU legislation. Nonetheless, no parliamentary system (as it exists in Canada) resulted from this process. The EP does not elect a responsible government depending on the support of majority parties. Despite the fact that it now participates in the election of the Commission and can pass a vote of non-confidence against an incumbent Commission, a duality between a majority supporting a government and an opposition has not evolved.

The EP may also be compared to the American Congress, a legislature in a presidential system. Each house of the US Congress follows a different “style.” While the Senate is oriented towards national issues, members of House of Representatives strongly depend on their local electorate. The European system of governance constitutes a similarly divided “two-chamber” system. It combines a supranational institution, the EP, and an intergovernmental body, the Council. However, powers of the executive and legislative institutions of the EU are not clearly separated. The institutions have to cooperate in policy-making. With the Commission setting the agenda, it is up to the EP and the Council to come to a joint decision.

In contrast to the Westminster type of parliament and the American Congress, the EP is less influenced by party politics. MEPs are organized in factions formed by European parties. Nonetheless, voting behaviour is not only determined by affiliation with these groups, but is also influenced by national parties or governments (Rasmussen 2008; Withaker 2005). Party discipline is limited. However, with the extended use of the co-decision procedure, party membership has an increasing impact on the negotiation process, on the allocation of powerful committee positions (rapporteurs) and on voting behaviour. In this context, scholars have revealed an increasing impact of the traditional left-right cleavage (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007), although others have pointed out the fragmentation and multidimensionality of the party system (Coman 2009; Maurer, Parkes, and Wagner 2008). Moreover, national orientations continue to play a role, though MEPs increasingly support European against national interests. Therefore, the structure of the Parliament has generated a kind of consensus democracy.

Consensus democracy requires that majority coalitions have to be negotiated for particular issues both in the EP and between the Parliament and the Council. As a consequence, the deliberative mode of policy-making in the EP has turned into a bargaining mode. When it lacked significant legislative powers, the Parliament had to publish reasoned opinions, mainly debated in the plenary and decided regardless of opinions of the Commission or the Council. This has changed. Since legislative tasks dominate the agenda, the EP has to coordinate its decisions with the Council and the Commission. In this context, committees play a decisive role. As a consequence, coordinators representing party groups and policy experts in committees, in particular the “rapporteurs,” have gained power (Benedetto 2005; Costello and Thomson 2010). These actors are responsible for forming coalitions in the Parliament and for coordinating opinions with the other legislative institutions. The power of committees has become more significant with the tendency to end legislative processes by “early agreements” after the first reading (Rasmussen and Toshkov 2011). As research has revealed, the tasks of rapporteurs for salient issues are distributed among party groups in a process of competitive voting. Inside groups, coordinators select individual members whom they expect to maximize party coherence regarding the legislation at stake (Hausemer 2006; Yordanova 2011). Nonetheless, policy specialists in the EP act in multiple relations to parties, to special interests often advanced by lobbyists, to national parties or governments, and to the respective Council committee (Yordanova 2009).

A further particularity adds to the complexity of structures and processes. In contrast to other types of parliaments, the EP is part of an emerging multi-parliamentary system. Relations between national parliaments and national groups in the EP have developed during the 1990s. Some national parliaments have included MEPs in their European Affairs Committees. With the subsidiarity control procedure

introduced by the Lisbon Treaty these inter-parliamentary relations arguably have become more significant (Crum and Fossum 2009), in particular since the EP negotiated an inter-institutional agreement with the Commission requesting that both institutions cooperate on legislative initiatives and coordinate their relations with national parliaments. The emerging inter-institutional and inter-parliamentary relations can strengthen national groups as well as policy experts in the EP. To which extent this will counterbalance the relevance of European party groups is an open question.

Thus structures and processes in the EP clearly differ from what we can observe in national parliaments, regardless of which type of parliament we consider. Inside the Parliament, majorities on policy issues have to be negotiated in structures which are characterized by fluctuating and cross-cutting cleavages. The Lisbon Treaty increased the external linkages to institutions outside the Parliament. Co-decision with the Council became the ordinary procedure in legislation. The EP is also engaged in cooperation with the Commission. Finally, the new subsidiarity control can boost relations with national parliaments. Given these increasing tasks and the interlinked patterns of internal and external negotiations, parliamentary work has become more and more committee work and a matter of policy specialists. Yet, for these specialists, support from national parties and European party groups is highly important.

Since its first direct elections in 1979, the EP has turned from a deliberative, policy-influencing assembly into a policy-making parliament. Still, it constitutes a particular kind of parliament. There are no indications that changes caused by the Lisbon Treaty will bring the EP closer to one of the types we find at the national level. Decision-making inside the Parliament will continue to be influenced by party politics, national groups, and specialists in committees. The impact of these different patterns varies from policy to policy. But the relevance of all three dimensions of interaction structures has increased. Those who communicate with the Parliament have to take into account the complexity and variability of these structures.

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